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ABSTRACT

The paper examines current research on the social and personal competence of learning disabled (LD) adolescents and young adults, revealing two major lines of inquiry: (1) interpersonal environment (perceptions by others, sociometric status, social behavior deficits, verbal and nonverbal communication skills), and (2) affective status (self-concept, motivational patterns). Major limitations are identified to include the practice of studying LD subjects as a homogeneous population (masking their heterogeneity), and the lack of a conceptual model for clarifying the components and/or skills involved in social and personal functioning. An emphasis on subtypes of learning disabilities and a component analysis of social and personal competencies as they relate to specific settings are recommended in order to generate new and relevant research which can pinpoint individual needs more precisely. A 65-item reference list is appended. (JW)

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SOCIAL AND PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE LEARNING DISABLED: LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ADOLESCENT AND YOUNG ADULT

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Learning How to Learn: A High School/College Linkage Model

To Expand Higher Education Opportunities for Learning Disabled Students

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Abstract

This paper reviews the research dealing with the social and personal competence of learning disabled (LD) individuals, discusses the major limitations of this work and outlines the implications for asessment and interventions for the LD adolescent and young adult. The emergent body of work in this area provides support for the concept of heterogeneity with regard to the social and personal functioning of LD individuals and the need to identify and characterize those sub-groups of LD individuals who are particularly at risk to serious adjustment problems thoughout their life span. This review also illustrates the problematic nature of any current intervention efforts with LD adolescent and young adult populations and the importance of the use of an individualized approach for both assessment and intervention with this special population.

During the past several years, the social and personal problems of learning disabled students have received an increasing amount of attention. Several reasons appear to underlie the increased interest in the social and personal characteristics of this population. First, these factors appear to interact with academic learning and to play an important role in academic achievement outcomes (Grimes, 1981; Borkowski, Wehling & Turner, 1986; Kolligan & Sternberg, 1987). Second, because effective adolescent and adult functioning is related to adequate interpersonal functioning, adaptive deficiencies in these areas can lead to serious adjustment problems throughout the life span (Zigmond, 1978; Cowen, Pederson, Baligian, Izzo & Frost, 1973).

The purpose of this paper is to review the work that has been conducted on the social and personal characteristics of LD individuals, to comment on the limitations of this work and to discuss the implications for assessment and intervention for secondary and post-secondary LD students.

An examination of the literature dealing with the social and personal functioning of LD individuals indicates that this body of work has focused on two major lines of research. These include the LD individual's interpersonal environment, and the LD individual's affective status

INTERPERSONAL ENVIRONMENT

It is frequently claimed by researchers that LD individuals experience problems in interactive social competence (Bryan, T.H., Donahue & Pearl, 1981; Kronick, 1980; Vaughn, 1985; Center & Wascom, 1986) and that their difficulties

persist into adolescence and adulthood. A number of studies have tried to clarify the nature of the social characteristics of this group and have attempted to explain how the social behaviors of LD students differ from their non-learning disabled (non-LD) counterparts.

Nature of Social Characteristics

Investigators have examined the way in which LD individuals are perceived by their parents (Strag, 1972; Hoffman, Sheldon, Minskoff, Sautter, Steidle, Baker, Bailey & Echols, 1987), by teachers (T.H. Bryan, & McGrady, 1972; Darval, McKenney & Feagans, 1982; Siperstein & Goding, 1985; Center & Wascom, 1986), by independent observers (Richey & McKenney, 1978; Bryan, J.H., Bryan, T.H. & Sonnefield, 1982) and by their peers (Bryan, T.H., 1974; Siperstein, Bopp & Bok, 1978; Garrett & Crump, 1980). Overall, these studies have demonstrated the social deficits of this group as a whole and shown that LD students confront an interpersonal environment that is different from their non-LD peers. In general, LD students appear (a) to be perceived more negatively by parents, peers and teachers; (b) to receive more negative communications from their teachers, parents and peers; and(c) to be less accepted and more frequently rejected by their peers and teachers.

However, it is important to note that in several recent studies contradictory findings are reported. Ackerman and Howes (1986) examined the relationship of sociometric status in school and participation in after-school activities of LD students and their results differed from those in earlier studies which report on the generally low sociometric status of LD students. Their findings indicated that the LD population was heterogeneous with regard to sociometric status and that many LD students lead full and active social lives after school. Similar findings with regard to the heterogeneity of LD individuals were reported by

Faford and Haubrich (1981). In a follow-up study of young adults who had received educational services for learning disabilities as young children they indicated no unusual pattern of activities with respect to school, vocational or social adjustment for the total sample. It is of interest to note, however, that when the college student population was partialed out of the sample a different profile of needs emerged for the remainder of the sample with regard to vocational and social adjustment.

Finally, in an observational study in which the interactions of LD and non-LD junior high school students in regular classrooms were investigated Schumaker, Wildgen and Sherman (1982) reported that LD students were not social isolates in the classroom. They found that LD students initiated as many conversations with their peers as non-LD students, and peers did not ignore the initiations of LD students more often than they ignored the initiations of non-LD students. Overall, the findings of this study indicated that there were more similarities in the social behavior among LD and non-LD junior high students than differences.

Similarly, Sabornie and Kauffman (1986) in a study of ninth through twelfth grade students found that mainstreamed LD secondary students did not differ significantly in sociometric status from their non-LD peers.

Explanations of Social Behaviors

Investigators interested in explaining how the social behaviors of LD students differ from their non-LD peers have usually focused on a specific area of deficit which they consider the primary cause of the deficiencies in the social competence reported for LD students.

Social Problems: A number of studies indicate that LD students have more difficulty in solving social problems and are less able to predict the consequences for social behaviors than their non-LD peers (Bryan, J.H. & Sonnefeld, 1981; Bruno, 1981; Schumaker, Hazel, Sherman & Sheldon, 1982). Although LD students have appropriate insights into acceptable social behaviors (Ackerman, Elardo & Dykman, 1979) they are more likely than their non-LD counterparts to choose

unacceptable social alternatives when they are asked to solve a social problem (Bryan, J.H., Sonnefeld & Greenberg, 1981; Bryan, T.H., Werner & Pearl 1982; Schumaker, et al., 1982). Kronick (1980) has proposed that the social problems of LD individuals may result from a deficit in schematic judgment, or an inability to realize the organizational pattern of an interactional situation.

Perception of Non-verbal Cues: Other studies have looked at the LD student's ability to perceive and interpret adequately the affective cues of others. For example, Bochara (1976) presented stories to LD subjects and had them select appropriate facial expressions from a set of pictures. The LD subjects made significantly more errors than their non-LD peers. Wiig and Harris (1974) found that LD adolescents were significantly less efficient than non-LD adolescents at labeling the emotions conveyed by video-taped nonverbal expressions of anger, embarrassment, joy and other emotions. J.H. Bryan (1977) in a similar study presented a film of an adult expressing different feelings and found a significant difference between the LD subjects and the non-LD subjects with the LD group being less able to interpret and describe the emotions presented in an accurate manner. However, this finding was not replicated in a follow-up study (La Greca, 1981).

Verbal Communication: By far the largest body of work in this area has examined the verbal communicative competence of LD students in social situations. T.H. Bryan (1982) has provided a linguistic perspective and contends that the social deficits of LD individuals are due to deficiencies in the pragmatics needed for interpersonal communication and that they lack an understanding of the rules that govern socially acceptable speech interactions. Deficits in inappropriate communicative interactions have been noted for some LD individuals. They make and receive more negative statements (Bryan, T.H., & Bryan, J.H., 1986); make more rejecting and competetive statements (Smiley & Bryan, 1983); and make

more verbal statements that are egocentric (Soenksen, Flagg & Schmits, 1981) than their non-LD counterparts.

In addition to deficits in conversational skills, LD students exhibit deficits in referential communicative competence and have difficulty in adapting their communication style to the needs of the listener (Bryan, T.H.& Pflaum, 1978; Donahue, 1981; Noel, 1980; Spekman, 1981; Seidenberg, 1984). In general, LD students' ability to use their syntactic and semantic resources appropriately in social contexts (e.g., their pragmatic competence) is not as well established as in their non-LD peers and they have difficulty in engaging in effective and cooperative conversations with others (Donahue, Pearl, & Bryan, 1983).

AFFECTIVE STATUS

Learning disabled students are generally described as having a poor self-concept and as being poorly motivated academically (Black, 1974; Bruinicks, 1978; Alley & Deshler, 1979). A number of researchers have examined the assumption that the LD student will invariably have a poor self-concept while others have tried to clarify the motivational patterns of LD students.

Self-concept

The notion that LD students tend to have low self-esteem and a poor self-concept has been examined in a number of studies and has produced conflicting results. Two studies which examined self-concept in pre-adolescent LD population reported overall poor self-concepts in their subjects (Griffiths, 1975; Rosenthal, 1973). Similarly, Black (1974) found lower self-esteem among LD students. However, Silverman (1978) using the same instrument found no between-group differences. Rubner (1978) found that non-LD students demonstrated greater self-esteem than LD students in regular classrooms, but that LD students in special classes could not be differentiated from their non-LD counterparts on

the basis of self-esteem. A number of other studies have also found no evidence of lowered self-concepts or general competence in LD pre-adolescent or adolescent populations (Endler & Minden, 1972; Donnell, 1975; Silverman & Zigmond, 1983). For the most part, the studies undertaken in this area are equivocal and indicate no empirical support for the assumption that pre-adolescents or adolescents who are learning disabled will necessarily perceive themselves as incompetent.

Affectance Motivation

Currently, attribution theory research is being assimilated into the learning disability field as one approach to understanding LD students' motivational patterns. A number of researchers have investigated LD students' beliefs about the causes of academic success and/or failure in order to better understand their achievement efforts and task motivation.

A number of studies have examined the attributions of LD learners and found that repeated failure experiences lead LD students to believe that they do not have the ability to succeed and that their efforts do not lead to positive achievement outcomes (Butkowsky & Willows, 1980; Pearl, Bryan & Donahue, 1980; Pearl, 1982; Pearl, Bryan & Cordoni, 1982; Licht, 1983; Licht, Kestner, Ozkarogoz, Shapiro, & Clausen, 1985). Pearl (1982) found that LD students thought that lack of effort was less a cause of failure than did their non-LD peers and that good luck was more of a factor in their successes and that bad luck was less of a factor in their failures. Similarly, Licht et al. (1985) found that LD students were more likely to attribute their failures to insufficient ability rather than to insufficient effort than their non-LD counterparts. The attributions of LD college students have also been studied and the findings indicated that attributional differences remained. Even college students appear to hold self-depreciating beliefs about the reasons for their successes and failures (Pearl, Bryan, & Cordoni, 1982).

LIMITATIONS

Direct evidence regarding the social and personal functioning of LD students is equivocal and the contradictory results that have been reported in a number of areas may be related to two major limitations of this body of research. First, for the most part, the approach used in all of these studies compared a group of LD subjects to a non-LD group. The practice of studying learning disabled ubjects as a homogeneous population has not allowed for the identification of the significant differences within the LD groups and has masked the heterogeneity of this population. Those few studies that looked at within group differences provide support for the concept of heterogeneity with regard to the social and personal functioning of LD individuals (Schumaker, et al., 1982; Faford & Haubrich, 1981; Ackerman & Howes, 1986). Future research in this area may need to consider more stringent criteria for subject selection in that different types of social or personal problems may be associated with different types of learning disabilities and some types of learning disabled individuals may have no social or personal problems at all (Schumaker & Hazel, 1984; Rourke, 1985).

A second major limitation is the lack of a conceptual model for clarification of the components and/or skills involved in social and personal functioning that are deficient in LD individuals. Of critical importance to our understanding of the social and personal problems of learning disabled students is the identification of the specific components and developmental stages that influence behavior in these domains. There are many reasons for problems in social and personal functioning and, while the problems of many LD students may reflect underlying cognitive, perceptual or linguistic deficits, they may also reflect

motivational deficits as well. Some learning disabled individuals may have difficulty perceiving themselves as able to control or affect the outcome of social situations and, therefore, are unwilling or unmotivated to act on the situation in order to influence the outcome (Sobal, Earn, Bennet & Humphries, 1982). Moreover, a meaningful developmental pattern of social and personality characteristics of individuals with learning disabilities has not emerged from the research literature. The way in which age, as a defining variable, interacts with the social and personal competence of LD individuals has not been addressed. It is unclear for example, whether the underlying deficits characteristic of performance of the preadolescent also apply to the adolescent or young adult. It is possible that some deficit areas may be ameliorated through maturation and, therefore, may not have a similar impact on the social or personal functioning of the adolescent or young adult (Schumaker & Hazel, 1984; Zigmond & Brownlee, 1982).

IMPLICATIONS

Research investigating the complex concept of social and personal competence of LD individuals is at a beginning stage and the social and personal problems of LD students will continue to be on active focus of research for some time to come.

Currently, there is a growing concern with regard to the social and personal adjustment of LD adolescents and young adults (Faford & Haubrich, 1981; Zigmond & Brownlee, 1982; Hoffman, et al., 1987). At the same time, there is a paucity of information on the social and personal functioning of this population. Much of the research in this area has focused on the LD preadolescent population and the findings of this body of work coupled with the few studies that looked at older LD students indicates that the adolescent and young adult LD population is heterogeneous with regard to social and personal functioning. The assumption in the literature that deficits in social and/or personal adjustment are

inevitable concomitants of learning disabilities has not been substantiated. What still needs to be specified are the particular types of learning disabilities associated with different types of social and personal problems and identification of those sub-groups of learning disabled individuals who are particularly at risk to serious adjustment problems throughout their life span.

As a result of the limitations of the research outlined earlier, the implications for the LD adolescent and young adult are difficult to specify. However, the findings of the large number of empirically based research studies that have focused on identification of the social and personal attributes that differentiate LD individuals from their non-LD counterparts can provide some preliminary ideas for assessment and intervention.

Because LD adolescents and young adults are heterogeneous with regard to their social and personal functioning it is important that an individualized approach be used for both assessment and intervention in order to determine the individual training needs appropriate for a particular individual.

Although a large number of social and personal deficits have been identified in the literature for the LD population, the specific social and personal competencies needed by LD adolescents and young adults for successful performance in specific settings (e.g., secondary or post-secondary educational settings, vocational settings) still need to be identified. After these competencies are characterized, they can be used as an objective means of assessing those behaviors that are requisite for successful performance in either academic or vocational settings and can form the basis for the objectives of an intervention program.

Along these lines, Gresham (1984) has developed a norm-referenced social skills criterion check-list which outlines the social skills appropriate for different age groups in order to assist teachers in identifying those skills which need to be taught. Similarly, Salend and Salend (1986) have identified the

social skill competencies necessary for successful performance in secondary level mainstream settings as judged by a sample of secondary regular and special educators.

The heterogeneity of the LD adolescent and young adult population precludes the possibility of ever identifying the 'one best method' of intervention that can address the possible social or personal problems faced by this group. However, a number of procedures have been identified which are frequently used to teach social and interpersonal skills. These include teaching specific social skills to an individual student and providing feedback; modeling; managing group contingencies; cognitive behavior modification (which entails teaching self-monitoring); and using cooperative not competitive interactions between LD and non-LD students (Madden & Slavin, 1983).

Additionally, the procedures used to teach social and interpersonal skills need to be based on the identification of the dimension or nature of the deficits. Gresham (1982) drawing on Bandura's (1977) work on social learning theory identifies three dimensions for conceptualizing the teaching of social and interpersonal skills. The first dimension refers to whether or not the skill is present in the individual's behavioral repertoire (skill deficit). The second dimension classifies those social behaviors the individual has but does not use (performance deficit). The third dimension catagorizes those social behaviors not displayed because the individual's lack of self-control interferes with their ability to demonstrate the appropriate behavior (self-control deficit). According to Gresham (1982), procedures used to teach specific skills need to be linked to the dimension which best characterizes the skill deficit.

Although there have been several social skills training programs developed for elementary age socially withdrawn children that have been implemented and evaluated (Grimes, 1981; Vaughn, 1985), there is no empirical evidence that interventions in the area of social and personal functioning can have a significant

impact on the lives of LD adolescents or young adults or contribute to their more successful performance in specific settings. The important individual differences among LD populations as well as among those with whom they must interact make the effective development of intervention programs for the teaching of social and interpersonal skills extremely difficult. However, an emphasis on sub-types of learning disabilities and a component analysis of social and personal competencies as they relate to specific settings can generate new and relevant research which can help us to better determine which LD adolescents and young adults need interventions and which deficits need to be ameliorated in order to improve the life adjustment of this special population.

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